



## IN MEMORIAM: HAROLD F. MAYFIELD, 1911-2007

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## In Memoriam

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### IN MEMORIAM: HAROLD F. MAYFIELD, 1911–2007

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Harold Ford Mayfield, AOU Fellow, past President, and Brewster Medal awardee, died on 27 January 2007, at the age of 95, at the Swan Creek Retirement Village in Toledo, Ohio. He had been in declining health for several months.

Scientist, naturalist, business executive, mentor, and raconteur, Harold Mayfield was one of those rare, gifted people whose contributions gained him international prominence in two disparate fields of endeavor. Harold was born on 25 March 1911 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was the adopted child of Frank and Mae Ford Mayfield, who took him to their home in Iowa. Later the family moved to Alton, Illinois, where Harold attended high school. He excelled in athletics as well as academics, winning championships in tennis and eventually becoming a semiprofessional basketball player. He received a Bachelor's degree from Shurtleff College, Carbondale, Illinois (now part of Southern Illinois University), and a Master's degree in Mathematics from The University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. On 14 June 1936 he married Virginia Duval, forming a devoted partnership that was sustained for more than 70 years.

After a brief stint as a teacher in his hometown high school, Harold was hired into the personnel department at the Alton, Illinois, plant of Owens-Illinois Company. In due time, Harold rose through the ranks at Owens-Illinois and was transferred to the company's headquarters in Toledo, where he eventually became director of personnel. He built a national reputation in the field of personnel management, publishing 92 articles on the subject in business journals. He served as an adviser to the President's Council on Economic Opportunity during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and received a distinguished service award from the American Association of Industrial Management in 1965.

At the age of 28, Harold suffered a stroke. Temporarily incapacitated and no longer able to compete in strenuous athletics, Harold sought a hobby to fill his spare time. He chose bird study, and his hobby soon grew into a lifelong passion. Through a friendship with Dr. Josselyn Van Tyne at the University of Michigan, Harold soon became involved in a study of the rare Kirtland's Warbler. The eventual result was a 1960 monograph (*The Kirtland's Warbler*, Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan) that set a standard for avian life-history studies and earned Harold the 1961 William Brewster medal. He followed this with the first paper recognizing the deleterious impact of Brown-headed Cowbirds on the warbler (*Evolution* 15:174–179, 1961).

After a number of trips to the High Arctic, Harold produced a superb study of the breeding biology of the Red Phalarope (*Living Bird* 17:7–39, 1978) and authored nearly 200 additional publications in ornithology and conservation. Notable among his contributions is a technique for estimating nest success (*Wilson Bulletin* 87:456–466, 1975). It remains the most frequently cited paper in the long history of *The Wilson Bulletin* (now *Journal of the Wilson Ornithological Society*).

Harold also became very involved in service to ornithological organizations and is the only person to have served as president of the AOU and of the Wilson and Cooper ornithological societies.

Major awards given to Harold include the 1990 Arthur A. Allen Award from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, the 2002 Robert Ridgway Award from the American Birding Association, and the 2003 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Toledo Naturalists' Association, the only such award given by that group in its



HAROLD F. MAYFIELD, 1911–2007  
(Photograph courtesy of *The Toledo Blade*.)

74-year history. He was elected to the Ohio Conservation Hall of Fame in 1978. Although he did not have a doctorate, Harold held an appointment as adjunct Professor of Biology at the University of Toledo and received Honorary Doctor of Science degrees from Bowling Green State University and Occidental College. Harold remained active and vigorous into his early seventies, when a serious auto accident limited his mobility. Although often in pain and unable to travel, he continued to maintain a lively correspondence with fellow ornithologists and continued to write and publish into his nineties.

Harold often spoke of himself as an amateur, but his boundless energy, laser-beam intelligence, and passion for birds more than compensated for his lack of formal academic training in ornithology. He stands as perhaps the paramount example of what a dedicated amateur can accomplish.

A fascinating sidelight to Harold's life is the story of his adoption and of the subsequent discovery of his biological family. Harold was born James Blegen, son of John Blegen and Ida Thorberg. Because of the stigma of bearing children out of wedlock at the time, Harold was

given up for adoption to the Mayfields, who changed his name. Subsequently, his biological parents married and had four additional children. After the deaths of his adoptive parents, Harold discovered that his mother was still living and wrote her a letter. She invited him to visit her in Minnesota, and they were reunited after a separation of more than 70 years. He was eventually able to meet his four younger brothers and sisters, who apparently had been unaware of his existence.

Harold is survived by his wife, Virginia, by four children—Sigrid Boie of McCall, Idaho; John Mayfield of Ames, Iowa; Mindy Mayfield of Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Charles Mayfield of Fremont, California—and by four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. His many remarkable accomplishments pale in comparison to the example he set as a husband and father, and the influence he had on those fortunate enough to know him personally. Harold was a role model and mentor, a delightful raconteur, and a font of knowledge on a wide range of subjects. He celebrated life with dignity, grace, discretion, and poise. He was always a gentleman.

To ornithologists, Harold's name will be forever linked with the endangered Kirtland's Warbler. It would be difficult to overstate his role in the remarkable recovery of that species. So the most eloquent tribute to Harold

Mayfield's life comes not from these poor words, but from the voices of tiny gray and yellow birds, now more than 1,400 strong, whose songs still ring out across the jack pines of Michigan.

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